

The SRA: Loophole or Lifeline?

The following Q & A about the Special Review Assessment process is taken from a forthcoming report, *New Jersey's Special Review Assessment: Loophole or Lifeline?* The report examines the issues raised by the SRA and the debate over whether to reform, replace, or eliminate it. For a copy of the complete report contact Stan Karp: skarp@edlawcenter.org.



Frequently Asked Questions about the SRA

What is the Special Review Assessment or SRA?

The SRA is a way for students who have not passed all sections of the High School Proficiency Assessment (HSPA) to meet New Jersey's high school graduation requirements. It is a series of "performance assessment tasks" (PATs) designed by the NJ Department of Education (NJDOE) as "an alternative assessment that provides students with the opportunity to exhibit their understanding and mastery of state graduation standards in contexts that are familiar and related to their experiences."

How does the SRA differ from the High School Proficiency Assessment (HSPA)?

The HSPA is a traditional "paper and pencil" standardized exam that uses multiple choice questions, "open-ended," short-answer questions, and a writing sample to assess student skills in math and language arts. It is administered in a formal testing environment under timed, secure conditions on dates specified by the State. The HSPA is created and scored at the State level by a commercial vendor hired by the NJ Department of Education.

Typically, students pursue the SRA after they have failed to pass one or more sections of the HSPA. The SRA requires students to successfully complete a series of performance tasks that are aligned with State Standards and created by the same commercial vendor who creates the HSPA. However, the SRA is administered locally on a flexible schedule in less formal, untimed settings. Students may be given multiple opportunities to complete the performance tasks, which are scored by local educators who have been trained in the use of scoring rubrics provided by the state. The SRA is also available in Spanish, Portuguese and Gujarati, while the HSPA is given only in English.

To earn a diploma, both HSPA and SRA students must also accumulate at least 110 credits, pass all core courses required for graduation, and meet other local requirements.

How does the content of the SRA compare to the content of the HSPA?

The SRA and the HSPA are designed to be educationally equivalent assessments. The SRA content is linked to the HSPA test specifications in order to ensure that students who are certified through the SRA process have demonstrated the same skills and competencies at comparable levels as students who passed the written HSPA test. As Education Commissioner Lucille Davy has said, "the SRA was never intended to be used as a lower standard, but rather a different means of measuring the same standard." [*NJ Senate Budget Committee Testimony*, April 16, 2007]

For each part of the HSPA that a student does not pass in the regular testing environment, he/she must successfully complete two PATs from the same cluster of skills measured by

the HSPA. According to the NJDOE, the difficulty, or "rigor", of the PATs is comparable to HSPA questions. (Doolan & Peters, 2007) In fact, Dr. Linda Darling-Hammond of Stanford University, a nationally-recognized expert on high school assessment issues, has described the SRA as the type of alternative test that "measure[s] students' skills and knowledge in a more dynamic way that can better inform ongoing instruction and provide a more thorough assessment of students' learning." (Darling-Hammond et al, 2006)

Why is there an "alternative" high school graduation test?

The Center for Educational Policy reports that of the 25 states that currently require an "exit test" for high school graduation, 17 provide some sort of alternative to the traditional test. The SRA is one such alternative. Just as students learn in different ways, students may demonstrate their knowledge and skills in different ways. Educators and professional organizations of experts in educational measurement agree that "multiple measures" of student learning are the most reliable and that no single "high-stakes test" should be used to make important decisions about a student's future.

Who is eligible to take the SRA?

Since 1991, the SRA alternative has been available to all students who do not successfully pass one or more portions of the HSPA. The number of students using SRA has risen steadily over the years, including significant increases between 2002 and 2003 when the state replaced the High School Proficiency Test with the more challenging High School Proficiency Assessment. In 2006, the state reported that over 13,000 NJ graduates received their high school diplomas by using the SRA to meet state standards. (NJDOE SRA 2006 Annual Survey. *Note: State data on the number of SRA graduates varies according to the source used. For example, NJ School Report Card data indicate a total of just over 11,000 SRA graduates.*)

What do we know about SRA students?

Unfortunately, not as much as we should. There is little information available to policymakers or the public about the educational experiences or the post-school outcomes of SRA students. Accordingly, it is difficult to know whether SRA students have had access to sufficiently rigorous course sequences and high quality instruction from fully-certified educators that might have better prepared them to meet HSPA requirements or how the post-school life outcomes of SRA graduates compares with either dropouts or HSPA graduates in terms of college participation, employment, health, and criminal justice encounters, etc.

The importance of gathering such data to make informed policy decisions that impact thousands of students and hundreds of communities is a strong argument for moving cautiously in this area. It is also another reason for creating the oft-mentioned longitudinal, student-level database needed to track the progress of NJ students through the K-12 system and beyond.

What does the limited amount of available data about SRA students reveal?

In 2006, about 12 percent of all NJ graduates, and about one-third of all graduates in the urban Abbott districts, used SRA to meet state graduation requirements. (New Jersey Department of Education, SRA graduation rate from 2005-06 School Report Card; Number of graduates from 2005-06 Fall Survey.)

Among the state's 31 Abbott districts, rates of SRA use vary widely, from single digits to over 50 percent. Similar wide variation exists among high schools inside non-Abbott districts. The state has not conducted any studies that might help explain these variations, although such a study was explicitly called for in the Abbott regulations (N.J.A.C. 6A:10A-3.2 (e) 6).

While over 40 percent of all SRA graduates are from urban Abbott districts, the majority of all SRA graduates, 58 percent, are from non-Abbott districts. Over the past ten years, rates of SRA use have increased more rapidly in the non-Abbott districts while rates in Abbott districts have stabilized, albeit at much higher levels.

By an almost 2 to 1 margin, more students use the SRA to satisfy the required mathematics standards than the language arts standards according to the New Jersey Department of Education SRA 2006 Annual Survey. This raises significant issues about the state's math curriculum and about opportunities to learn, including access to certified math teachers and high quality instruction.

Is the administration and scoring of SRA consistent across districts?

No. While the State is responsible for developing and supplying the content of the SRA and the PATs, districts and schools are responsible for organizing the administration of the SRA, providing supplemental instruction to SRA students, and scoring SRA portfolios in accordance with general state guidelines. SRA student portfolios must be submitted to the County Superintendent's offices. However, the growing numbers of students using SRA has long exceeded the capacity of County Offices to review and monitor the SRA process closely. Some limited oversight and spot-checking of the process by the NJDOE does occur. However, the lack of consistency and transparency across districts with respect to SRA administration and evaluation appears to be a major factor undermining the SRA's credibility as an assessment tool in some quarters.

If the SRA and HSPA are of comparable educational rigor, why do so many students fail one, (HSPA) but pass the other (SRA)?

This is another question that has not been adequately researched. Since the content of the two examinations is similar and of comparable difficulty, it is important to determine why students who seem unable to pass the HSPA ultimately pass the SRA. Is it a matter of differential academic preparation or support, test anxiety, timed vs. untimed testing situations and/or scoring differences? Several possible explanations, both positive and negative, have been offered:

- Inconsistency and the lack of review in scoring SRA portfolios may dilute state standards, allowing more students to pass

- Students may perform below potential on HSPA because they know the SRA alternative exists
- Given the particularly high failure rate on the mathematics portion of the state examination, many believe that SRA students have had inadequate access to rigorous mathematics curricula and/or qualified mathematics educators

On the other hand, the SRA program may be producing positive results by:

- Providing ongoing, in-school support and personalized, supplemental instruction to SRA students
- Providing additional time to complete PATs
- Allowing for flexible scheduling of SRA administration, providing more opportunities for students with attendance issues
- Using "mastery learning" approaches that provide multiple opportunities to succeed
- Providing a less intimidating, more supportive environment than formal, standardized testing situations which often include:
 - The use of "distracters" among possible responses
 - Complex instructions which may impede optimal performance
 - Cultural- or class-based references in test material that may reflect differential life experiences or background knowledge

A national survey of alternative assessment practices found that "these concerns are especially important for students with learning differences who may require different formats to demonstrate their knowledge." (Darling-Hammond et al, 2006, p. 16)

What would be the impact of eliminating SRA? Who would be most affected?

Available research and the experience of other states indicate that eliminating the SRA would significantly reduce high school graduation rates and increase the number of dropouts, particularly among students in low income districts, as well as African American, Latino, and immigrant youth. Since 60 percent of SRA graduates come from non-Abbott districts, it is clear that these effects would be felt statewide and would almost certainly affect NJ's long-standing record of having one of the nation's best overall graduation rates and one of the best graduation rates for students of color. A detailed analysis of graduation data from three urban districts also suggests that the following student groups would be most vulnerable to negative consequences:

- English Language Learners would be dramatically disadvantaged
- males more than females would be educationally affected
- students who have had limited opportunities to learn in terms of course work and/or access to qualified math educators
- students who entered the NJ public schools during their secondary years

- students with highly mobile families
- immigrant youth
- students who have difficulties with timed tests
- students with disabilities, especially undiagnosed disabilities

What are some arguments in favor of retaining SRA?

Supporters of the SRA note that in recent years between 11,000 and 15,000 NJ students have earned high school diplomas annually through the SRA. (New Jersey Department of Education, School Report Card data and SRA Annual Survey). They argue that it is in the best interests of these students, their communities, and the State to keep them in school, on track to graduate, and eligible to pursue college or other post-secondary options. Eliminating the SRA would raise dropout rates, lower graduation rates, and disproportionately affect students of color. This would, almost by definition, constitute bad public policy and would not help improve schools. Supporters also note that the SRA performance assessment tasks cover the same subject matter as the High School Proficiency Assessment. If there are problems with the consistency and reliability of the SRA process, these problems should be fixed without eliminating it.

What are some arguments in favor of eliminating SRA?

Critics argue that the SRA is a form of "low expectations" that allows students to get a diploma without meeting the high standards needed for success in college and careers. Some also contend that the SRA administration and scoring process are too inconsistent and too poorly monitored to be a reliable measure of proficiency for state graduation standards. They believe that eliminating the SRA would be a step toward raising expectations and standards for all NJ students.

What alternatives are there to eliminating SRA?

In May 2007, the NJDOE presented several options to the NJ State Board of Education for improving the consistency and reliability of the SRA process. These options included moving the scoring of SRA portfolios away from schools and districts, where they evaluate their own students, to "regional centers" where educators, trained in using the state's scoring rubrics, would evaluate SRA performance tasks on a blind and more technically verifiable basis. This could improve the reliability and transparency of the SRA process and increase its credibility as a measure of proficiency of state graduation standards. Districts and schools with a high number of SRA students would also be required to develop plans to reduce those numbers.

There are other alternatives to placing greater reliance on a single high-stakes exam that can be drawn from the experience of the 17 other states that currently provide alternatives to high-stakes exit tests. These alternatives include reporting exit exam scores on high school transcripts without using those scores to deny diplomas to students who successfully meet other graduation requirements; using multiple measures, including standardized tests, course grades, and attendance requirements to make graduation decisions without using any single measure to determine the decision; and developing performance assessment options for demonstrating proficiency on state standards that are open to all students, not just those who fail parts of the exit exam.

How is SRA related to other secondary reform issues?

While the debate over SRA raises specific issues about NJ's high school graduation policy and assessment practices, in many respects it is a subtopic of a much broader discussion about secondary reform that is now taking place at both the state and national levels. The larger issue is what combination of policies, programs, and reforms can effectively address the challenge of closing achievement gaps while simultaneously raising expectations and achievement levels for all students. NJ has begun to publicly discuss and debate these challenges with ambitious reform efforts such as the HS Redesign Steering Committee, the American Diploma Project, and the Abbott Secondary Education Initiative. These efforts are still in the early stages of developing a coherent plan for implementation at the state, district, and school levels. The SRA debate presents policymakers with the challenge of aligning changes in the SRA with these larger reform initiatives in ways that improve their prospects for success.

What is the timeline for revising or replacing the SRA?

In August 2005, the NJ State Board of Education adopted a resolution that proposed phasing out the SRA beginning with the freshman class that entered in September 2006 for language arts and the entering freshman class in September 2007 for math. However, the State Board deferred final action on this tentative timeline and directed the Department of Education "to develop alternative opportunities for students to demonstrate the achievement of high school graduation requirements...[and] to present these alternative opportunities to the State Board of Education for approval prior to the State Board of Education taking any action to amend the Statewide Assessment System requirements in N.J.A.C. 6A:8-4.1." With the proposed timeline for replacing SRA now upon us, the State Board is faced with another round of decision-making.

However, the delay in reforming or replacing the SRA process has led to considerable uncertainty about its current status. This fall both freshmen and sophomore students and their teachers will return to school uncertain about the availability of the SRA option as they approach graduation. Schools and districts face similar uncertainty about sustaining their supplemental instruction programs for potential SRA students (some of which involve "early identification" of students in 9th and 10th grades). Schools and districts will also need ample lead time to prepare for any new or alternative SRA process, as assessment calendars, instructional programs, and current testing practices will need to be reviewed and changed.

Another significant consideration is the timeline for implementing the State's Secondary Education Initiative (SEI), a major secondary reform effort currently underway to introduce college preparatory curriculum, small learning environments, and improved family/student supports to all Abbott middle and high schools. Current regulations call for implementing the SEI in Fall 2008.

As the data presented in this report shows, more than a third of Abbott graduates currently receive their diplomas through the SRA. Eliminating the SRA before significant and demonstrable improvements are made in secondary programs and supports could have a major negative impact on graduation rates, dropout rates, the SEI reform effort, and the prospects for broader reform.